

“LISTENING THE FORBIDDEN VOICES”: A CRITICAL STUDY OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION PORTRAYED IN PLAYS OF VIJAY TENDULKAR

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ABSTRACT

Man and woman are two the most essential elements in the formation of family as well as society. Woman and man are defined in different ways in different societies. Their different identities are determined on the ground of ‘concept of sex’ and ‘concept of gender’ where the first refers their particular biological identity while the second confirms their social roles provided to them under the process of socialization. Sex differences such as the ability to give birth are biologically determined and are different from socially prescribed gender roles. Under this perception of ‘social roles’, the different positions of women and men in society are influenced by historical, social, religious, economic and cultural realities. Their gender relations constitute and are constructed by a range of institutions such as the family, legal systems, or the market. Gender relations are hierarchical relations of power between women and men and always tend to disadvantage women. These hierarchies are often accepted as ‘natural’ but are socially determined relations, culturally biased, and subject to change over time. However, there is no known society where man and woman have equal power and gender roles. Women continue to be placed, implicitly, in the category of nature - instinct, sentiment, irrationality - while men, on the contrary, are placed in the category of culture - reflection, abstraction of a mental system. Generally, woman are considered weak, emotional, personified beauty and thus they are made subject of subordination, submission and more or less marginalization, depending on their country which gives birth of the thought of gender discrimination. Indeed, gender discrimination has been an issue of critical debate throughout the centuries in India but it becomes more relevant in contemporary times with influences of globalization.

Literature, being one of the vehicle of culture and true mirror of society, has brought this social phenomenon of gender discrimination impressively for “listening the forbidden voices” of woman as well as to show the real potential of the woman. Vijay Tendulkar, one of the greatest milestones in modern Indian theatre and literature, always lent to his ears to “hear their mute voices” to change them from “dumb dolls” to “speaking sparks”. This paper outlines a theoretical framework applicable to the concept of gender discrimination in the context of Indian society through the play of Vijay Tendulkar, such as, Kamala.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Sex, Gender Relation, Power Relation, Gender Discrimination

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Sub Theme: Gender Discrimination and Inequalities in Social and Cultural Spheres in India

Before going to comment on gender discrimination and Tendulkar’s approach towards its presentation in his plays, we have to go through the concept of gender. Gender is an essentially dynamic concept which brings into question the apparent immutability of social roles. Gender, in its narrowest sense, means socially constructed sex, be it female or male. It was in the 1970’s that American and English feminists started using the terms “gender” and “gender relations”. Hence, the transition was made from “study of the differences between the sexes to relations between the sexes both in the sense of social relations and conceptual relations”. (1991:185-190)

In eighteenth century, an age where the labour of man was privileged over that of women, Wollstonecraft provided the first major theoretical exploration of the gender inequality and discrimination. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* Wollstonecraft rejected the established view that women are naturally weaker or inferior to men. The unequal nature of gender relations, she proposed, was because the lack of education kept the women in a secondary position. The characteristics that one associates with feminine in women are socially given values and women assimilate these values so that she fits into the category of the feminine. Wollstonecraft was thus one of the pioneers who moved away from a biological view of the gender to a social one. While Wollstonecraft was radical in seeking education as means of 'improving' the women's position in society, she was hesitant to upset the gender hierarchies.

In the twentieth century, the novelist Virginia Woolf in her works *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* explored the concept of gender, gender relations and gender discrimination. She argued that the women are trained to adopt patriarchal education system, aesthetics, values and merits designed by male literary authors as universal. Woolf also argued that authorship itself is gendered. Her idea of the androgynous creative mind and perhaps one of her most controversial ideas was an attempt to go beyond the male/female binary by saying:

In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating (2006:102)

The best artists, believed Woolf, were always a combination of the man and the woman, or 'man-womanly', and 'woman-manly', as she termed it (2006:103).

Feminist thinker Simone De Beauvoir's major insight is that there is no 'essence' of a woman; a woman is constructed as such by men and society. As she puts it: 'One is not born a woman but becomes one' (1984: 267). De Beauvoir's main thesis is that biological sex and social gender are not accidental. Patriarchy makes use of sexual difference so as to maintain an inequality between men and women. She proposed that women must take charge of their own choice. Instead of being the negative, inferior Other, they must become Subjects in their right. They need not be restricted by the roles and identities fostered or imposed on them by patriarchy.

Thus, sex is biological and gender is social. Gender is system of roles and values assigned to the biological traits and functions. However, one major problem with this feminists' view of gender as a social attribute and category is that it sees gender almost entirely as an imposition. In the late 1980's and early 1990's philosophers began rethinking this view of gender. Judith Butler, influenced by deconstructive thought, argued that far from being a set of fixed and stable values and roles assigned/imposed by society, gender was a performance or role enacted by individuals. This performance of the gender is, of course, social in the sense it is enacted, validated and accepted by the society. But what is important is that the role is also open to negotiation and alteration, to conflict and contest. By arguing that gender is a performance, the theorists were able to suggest that gender is not a fixed category. Its meaning depends on the location, time, cultural frameworks within which it is performed. Thus, gender and its meaning are constructed through repeated performances. As Judith Butler puts it: 'Identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1990:24-25)

According to postmodern and poststructuralist view of gender is the repeated citation of a sign, the repeated enactment of a language. They see gender as provisional, shifting, contingent and performed concept. The postmodern view rejects notions of essentiality, authenticity, authority, universality and objectivity.

The materialist feminist critics have turned away from the postmodern flexible, shifting, discursive view of gender by focusing on the social conditions, the economy and the politics. In their introduction to *Women, Class and the Feminist Imagination*, the editors Karan Hansan and Ilene Philipson argued that women's oppression can be attributed to both patriarchy and capitalism. It implies that gender inequalities are also determined by the class affiliations in male-dominated social structure. In other words, the work done by men in fields and factories is treated as productive labour, while the work done by women inside houses is rendered 'invisible'. This distinction and division of labour, argue the feminists, is a part of the gender wars within capitalism. The sexual division of labour replicates the unequal power relations of patriarchy and capitalism.

Different views of gender, whether it is Wollstonecraft's 'social construction', Woolf's 'authorship' and 'androgyny', Simone's existential feminism of 'Othering' and 'social conditioning', Butler's 'repeated performance', Postmodernist view of 'repeatedly reinvented unstable category', Poststructuralist view of 'repeated enactment of a language' or Materialist view of 'class' and 'capitalism', are reflected in plays of Vijay Tendulkar who has been very conscious of the question of gender discrimination, the reasons behind gender inequality and methods of upbringing gender harmony. Tendulkar, who once remarks, "As a social being I am against all exploitation, and I passionately feel all exploitation must end." (1992:147) could not close his eyes against gender exploitation and gender power-struggle under the premises of family (The Vultures), media (Kamala), and performance (*Silence! The Court is in Session*), state (*Ghashiram Kotwal*), caste (*Kanyadan*), sexual mores (*Sakharam Binder*) and sexual orientation (*A Friend's Story*). His ability to see the undercurrents in reality extended to gender politics. To understand his stand on this issue I have tried here to discuss his play, *Kamala*.

In *Kamala*, Tendulkar projects the 'family' and 'media' as the institution of 'social construction and conditioning'. Kamala, a tribal woman, bought from flesh market for two hundred and fifty rupees by a self-seeking journalist Jai Singh Jadhav to expose exploitation of woman in society and Sarita, the wife of Jai Singh are the prey of gender inequality. The socially constructed family values in them compel to them to be submissive, subordinate and without any identity of their own. For Jai Singh Jadhav, Kamala is an object that can procure a promotion in his job and a reputation in his professional life. That is why he forbids Sarita to give any food, good clothing and bath to Kamala before the press conference so that she looks to be miserable and can create high sensation.

"I mean she can have her bath tonight or tomorrow morning. And people of her kind don't have a bath for days on end. It's a famine area. Where would they get the water? And you'll be surprised-she'll feel dirtier after her bath." (1995:18)

Kamala's discussion with Sarita about their role in the life of their 'master' Jaisingh Jadhav reflects aptly the gender discrimination where both of them are presented as 'owned by their master'. Kamala says to Sarita:

"The master bought you; he bought me, too. He spent a lot of money on the two of us. Didn't he? It isn't easy to earn money. A man has to labour like an ox to do it. So, memsahib, both of us must stay here together like sisters. We'll keep the master happy. We'll make him prosperous. The master will have children. I'll do the hard work, and I'll bring forth the children, I'll bring them up. You are an educated woman. You keep the accounts and run the house. Put on lovely clothes and make merry with master Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I'll sleep with him. Agreed?" (1995:35)

Here both female characters, Sarita and Kamala, have been shown that they are unproductive, as Materialist Feminists oppose, only the object of sexual gratification for male and their role in the family is only to 'sleep with the master'; 'bring forth the children'; 'bring them up'; 'keep the master happy'; and 'make him prosperous'. They do not have any of their own identity except being the 'Other' of their 'Subject' as Simon puts it. It is clear here that the gender roles provided to them are not natural but social. Thus, the love of finery (jewelery, cloths and fashion), romance or beauty in women was not natural. The woman has been socialized and trained to believe that these are what make her truly feminine (2010:85). Even in the play, other male character Jain reminds Sarita about her entity in the household of her husband, Jaisingh.

"This warrior against exploitation in the country is exploiting you. He's made a drudge out of a horse-riding independent girl from a princely house Bye, lovely bonded labourer" (1995:17)

Actually many sociological thinkers accept that marriage in India increases the gender discrimination in many ways. As Krishnaraj remarks: "Marriage relations are the bedrock for fostering and sustaining patriarchal relations. They are simultaneously material and ideological. The eligibility of grooms and brides and the economic value attached attributes characterize marriage contracts. Though ritual and ceremonial elements are present, material valuation is dominant. Family status is the most critical attribute for marriage ability. Bride characteristics that are deemed desirable are beauty, intelligence and schooling. Thus 'schooling' adds to 'marriage ability' rather than empowerment (1999: 11)." In marriage "dowry has perhaps become a status marker than a reflection of groom's worth as such" (1999: 11) which compels parents for 'son-preference'. The son-preference in Indian families "has been an important indicator of the gender bias in India (1999: 10)." In the most number of his plays, Vijay Tendulkar has consciously shown marriage as negative force because he unconsciously believes that marriage plays indeed a crucial role in expanding gender inequality in India. A sarcastic tone prevails throughout the play wherever there is debate on marriage in the play. One of such conversation can be mentioned here which occurs between Sarita and her uncle Kakasaheb:

Kakasaheb

Sarita, the questions you are asking have only one answer. Because he's like that. That's why he's man. And that's why there's manhood in the world... I too was just like this. Don't go by what I seem to be today. I gave you're a lot of trouble. As if it was my right. I didn't care what she felt at all I was confident she would follow, even if she was limping. And she did follow the poor thing

Sarita

So, Sarita, go behind you master like that. It's your duty to do it-is that what you're saying?

Kakasaheb

It may be unpleasant, but it's true. If the world is to go on, marriage must go on. And it will go on like this.

Sarita

Why? Why can't men limp behind? Why aren't women ever masters? Why can't a woman at least ask to live her life the same way as a man? Why must only a man have the right to be a man? Does he have one extra sense? A woman can do everything a man can.(1995: 47)

In the Act two of the play Sarita realizes her position in the family as ‘subjugated’ and decides to voice against this gender discrimination through a press conference, as she puts:

“I am going to present a man who in the year 1982 still keeps a slave, right here in Delhi. Jaisingh Jadhav. I’m going to say: this man’s a great advocate of freedom. And he brings home a slave and exploits her. He doesn’t consider a slave a human being- just a useful object. One can use and throw away. He gets people to call him a sworn enemy of tyranny. But tyrannizes his own slave as much as he likes, and doesn’t think anything of it- nothing at all. Listen to the story of how he bought the slave Kamala and made use of her. The other slave he got free- not just free- the slave’s father shelled out the money- a big sum.” (1995:46)

After having been asked why she had been silent for last ten years against these atrocities by her uncle Kakasaheb she answers that her upbringing, in other words, social conditioning and training, has made her to be ‘silent’ which has been argued and considered as one of the main reasons behind gender discrimination by every feminist critics. As K. K. Ruthven puts it in a caustic tone: ‘The sense of being a woman cannot be treated as if it were a pre-constructed given- and therefore a source of incontestable authority to be appealed to when the going gets rough in arguments with men’ (1986:8).

“I was sleep. I was unconscious even when I was awake. Kamala woke me up. With a shock. Kamala showed me everything. Because of her. I suddenly saw things clearly. I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of a slave. I have no rights at all in this house. Because I’m a slave. Slaves don’t have rights, do they, Kakasaheb? They must only slave away. Dance to their master’s whim. Laugh, when he says, laugh. Cry, when he says, cry. When he says pick up the phone, they must pick it up. When he says, come to a party, they must go. When he says, lie on the bed- they” (1995:46)

At the end of the play, Sarita declares the need of voicing against this male domination and understanding of her own persona as an individual so that the gender discrimination can be repealed from the society.

“But a day will come come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave. I’ll no longer be an object to be used and thrown away. I’ll do what I wish, and no one will rule over me. That day has to come. And I’ll pay whatever price I have to pay for it.” (1995:18)

CONCLUSIONS

This critical study of Tendulkar’s play Kamala provides us the understanding that gender discrimination and inequality pervade in Indian society where women is considered as a puppet in the hands of men; they are victimized. In the name of ethics, traditions, conjugal norms and social values they are socialized in such way that they cannot imagine their own identity beyond the boundary of family and their husbands. It is interesting to note that even marriage in India is used as a tool to socialize the women to consider themselves as subordinate and secondary in the society. Tendulkar has been successful not only to show miserable plight of women in the family but has also suggested the ways to overcome this subjugation, that is, by only the self-realization and achieving their own individuality, equal to man, by the women. In the words of Sarita the message is ample clear:

“This must be changed. Those who do many things should be equal to men. Those who don’t are women. And there will be some among them who have beards and moustaches too.” (1995: 47)

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